

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES IN RESEARCH OF SOCIOLOGY

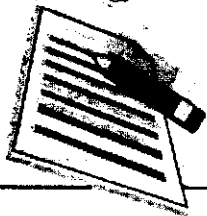
Social science is concerned with the explanation of human behaviour. Data of some kind will play an important role in such explanations, and to this end social scientists have devised methods and techniques for the systematic collection of data. Methods are processes and principles by which we approach the problems and seek answers. Every method has its own techniques, and techniques are tools for data collection. Here, we will discuss the most widely used research methods and techniques.

OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- discuss the different research methods, mainly, historical, comparative, experimental, functional and empirical methods; and
- explain the different techniques of data collection viz. observation, survey, case study Questionnaire, and interview.

The concept of a scientific study of society is based on the premise that it is impossible to gather objective, generalizable data. Acknowledging this, sociologists try to be as systematic as possible in carrying out their research. In this context, they have used many methods in studying society. Although, sociologists may use different methods, the scientific approach is basic to all of them. We would like to discuss the following methods of social research.



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4.1 HISTORICAL METHOD

The analysis of social change in history is carried out with the help of several methods. One of the important methods is the historical method. The historical method engages in the evaluation of sources of information about the past to determine their authenticity and the analysis of authentic sources for detailed data about the period being studied. Sources of information used by historians include written records of all types, laws, public records, reports, business documents, newspapers, diaries, letters, genealogies, travellers' accounts, and literature in all forms- as well as physical survivals in the form of buildings and artifacts. The historical method involves the study of origins, development and transformation of social institutions. In this method, a sociologist uses information pertaining to one or more societies over long periods of time. The main approach is to try to get some insights from the past experiences with regard to social behaviour.

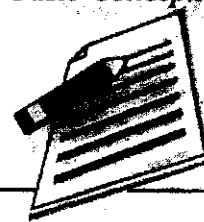
The historical method in sociology has taken two principal forms.

The first is that of the early sociologists, influenced by the philosophy of history and afterwards by the biological theory of evolution. This method involves a certain order of priorities in the problems for research and theory. It concentrates upon problems of the origins, development and transformation of social institutions, societies, and civilizations. It is concerned with the whole span of human history, with all the major institutions of society, as in the works of August Comte, Spencer, and Hobhouse.

Yet another form of historical method is characteristic of the works of Max Weber. This is exemplified especially in his studies of the origins of capitalism, the development of modern bureaucracy, and the economic influence of the world religions. The main methodological features of these studies are that particular historical changes of social structures and types of society are investigated (and these are compared in certain respects with other types of changes in society). In this process, both causal explanation and historical interpretation find a place.

The comparative method: The comparative method is used to study the different types of groups (large and small) and societies in order to determine analytically the factors that lead to similarities and differences in specified patterns of behaviour. The feature under examination may occur in the same society, for example, a comparison of rates of mobility between different classes. They may appear different societies; for example, rates of mobility may be compared between societies.

Usually, the term comparative method includes both the historical method and the cross-cultural method. Some writers, however, prefer to equate the comparative



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method with the historical method, and use the term cross-cultural method to refer to comparisons of contemporary cultures.

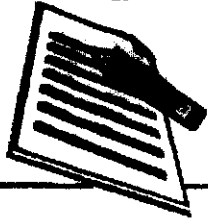
In sociological research, the comparative (or cross cultural) method is based on the idea that a society (or other social system) can not be fully understood without comparing it with other societies or systems. Developed most extensively by anthropologists, the comparative method is particularly useful for explaining how social systems change and develop. It is tempting, for example, to conclude that the pattern of change in our own society reflects universal human tendencies until we compare it with other societies and discover the rich variety of patterns that characterize human social life.

In his book on Social Structure, Murdock used cross-cultural research methods to examine the structure and function of the family. He found that some form of family existed in every one. In particular, he found the universality of the nuclear family 'either as the sole prevailing form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex forms is compounded'

In brief, the comparative method is used to gather data from different countries, different regions or different religions. An effort is made to see whether there are any common factors, which can explain patterns of behaviour. Thus, the comparative method entails the study of different groups and institutions in order to examine similarities and differences.

The comparative method was for long considered the method par-excellence of sociology. The comparative method is one way of testing hypotheses. Much recent sociological research has concentrated on testing limited hypotheses by small scale comparisons, e.g. connection between urban living and divorce or delinquency rates, between family size and social mobility between social class and educational attainment etc. Such studies have resulted in the kind of empirical co-relation and generalization.

The comparative method was first used by the evolutionist sociologists, but Durkheim, in *The Rules of Sociological method*, first set out clearly the significance of the method. Durkheim drew up classifications of behaviour (for example, suicide rates) to make it possible to test hypotheses about the relationship between social phenomena. The typology could be used when making comparisons. This is 'the nearest to an experimental method in sociology'. Durkheim favoured the comparative-historical approach because sociologist could not carry out experiments and help to rely on the method of indirect experiment (The comparison of similar cases in a systematic way.)



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4.2 THE EXPERIMENTAL (LABORATORY) METHOD

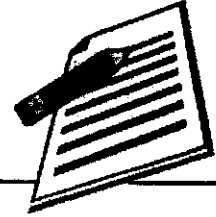
The experiment is an operation in a controlled situation in which the researcher tries to discover the effects produced by introducing one new variable into an experimental group and not into an otherwise identical control group. If the behaviour of the experimental group changes and that of the control does not, and then the change can be attributed to the introduction of the new variable. This is a method favoured in the natural sciences. Laboratory conditions enable the experimenter to control all the variables excepting the one which is being experimented. However, there are examples in sociology of 'field-experiments'. These take place in the 'real-world' and not in a laboratory. Those whose behaviour is studied in response to 'actors' engaged by the researcher do not know that a study is being conducted. Some of these types of research studies have certain of the characteristics of the comparative method. We may cite here some studies to illustrate our point.

In his study of Racial Discrimination in England, Daniel wished to discover the extent of racial discrimination in Britain in 1965. He arranged for three applicants to seek jobs, accommodation and insurance cover. These were an Englishman, a West Indian and a Hungarian. Each was given 'identical qualifications', they were of similar age and had good command of English. The findings showed that it was the Englishman who did the best in every aspect of the test, followed by the Hungarian. The West Indian always had the least success.

Myerson ('Experiments without Rats') asks, 'Have you ever walked into a café and noticed where people sit when they come in? Have you ever tried to see what happens when you try to share a table when there are other ones free? If so, then you have been carrying out an experiment of the sort that has recently become popular within a particular area of sociology'. She describes some studies which have been conducted to 'invade territory' in such public places and to 'violate expectations' of the unsuspecting public to uncover the rules of taken-for-granted life in libraries, cafes and so on.

4.3 FUNCTIONALIST METHOD

The functionalist method, in sociology and social anthropology, appeared initially as a reaction against the methods and claims of the evolutionists. The terms functional analysis and functionalism are often equated. Therefore, we would like first to understand the meaning of these terms before we discuss functional method. Functional analysis requires from the researcher that he/she explains or analyzes his observations of recurring phenomena in terms of their consequences for the wider social system within which they exist. In this context, functional analysis is a



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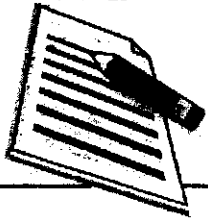
method of sociological and anthropological enquiry, which consists in examining social and cultural items by locating them in a wider context. These, usually, means showing how these items affect and are affected by others with which they co-exist over time within the same social system. In other words, functional method refers to the functional analysis, which is also known as functionalism and structural functionalism. In sociology, the functionalist method is traced primarily to the pioneering work of the nineteenth-century French sociologist Emile Durkheim and, in the twentieth-century, to the American sociologist Talcott Parsons and his students. Its anthropological roots extend to the work of Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliff-Brown. The functionalist method focuses on social systems as a whole, how they operate, how they change, and the social consequences they produce. Hence, functionalism provides a perspective from which to attempt an analysis of a society. The central concern is with the source of order and stability in society. The focus is on:

- (a) The way social institution help to maintain order in social life; and
- (b) The way structural arrangements in society influence behaviour.

In functionalism, society is conceived of as a system of inter-related parts in which no part can be understood in isolation from the whole. A change in any part is seen as leading to a certain degree of imbalance, which in turn results in changes in other parts of the system and to some extent to a re-organization of the system as a whole. The development of functionalism in the nineteenth century was based on the model of the organic system found in the biological sciences. Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer used an organic analogy, analyzing society as a kind of living organism. Just as a biological organism has inter-related tissues and organs that function together, they wrote, so does society. Like an organism, if society is to function smoothly, its various parts must work together in harmony. For example, just as the heart has the function of circulating the blood, so also do social institutions have specific functions for society as a whole.

Robert K. Merton dismissed the organic analogy but continued with the essence of functionalism. The image of society as a **whole as he maintained composed of inter-related parts**. Merton used the term functions to refer to the beneficial consequences of people's actions that help to maintain the equilibrium of a social system. In contrast, dysfunctions are consequences that undermine a system's equilibrium.

From the perspective of functional analysis, the group is a functioning whole, with each part contributing to the welfare of the whole. Whenever we examine a smaller part, we need to look for its functions to see how it is related to the larger unit. This basic approach can be applied to any social group, whether an entire society,



a college, or even a group as small as the family. Finally, we may view that functional analysis is a method, which refers to factors and forces of integration, equilibrium and also disequilibrium. At a given point of time inter-relation between different components of society can be studied from the functional point of view.

4.4 THE EMPIRICAL METHOD

The empirical method refers to the collection of data from the field. The facts of social life are studied and described as they exist. The techniques used in this method are observation, survey, experimental, case studies.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.1

Write True or False against each question:

1. A society can not be fully understood without comparing with other societies. True/False
2. Murdock Cliduat use cross cultural methods to examine the structure and function of the family. True/False
3. Durkheim set out the significance of comparative method. True/False
4. Experiment is possible in sociology. True/False
5. What are the sources of historical method?
6. How many methods of social research are there in sociology?
7. What is the difference between functionalism and functional analysis?
8. What techniques are used in the empirical method?

4.5 SOURCES OF DATA

Sociologists make use of both primary and secondary data in research. Primary data are that which they collect themselves by means of interviews, questionnaires, observation and so on, directly from respondents. Secondary data are that which they collect from other sources and which has already recorded (although not necessarily for public consumption). The sources of secondary data are: (a) biography, autobiography, letters, diaries, novels; (b) journals, quality newspapers, radio broadcasts, TV programmes; and (c) Census data, records from business firms, registration data: birth, death etc.; court records, social service departments

etc.; government records, relating to economy etc.; data from charities; pressure groups etc.

It is important to remember that much of research, especially the social research, makes use of both types.

4.6 TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION

Sociologists use different types of techniques for data collection keeping in view the nature of the problem under study. We will discuss here the most important techniques of data collection, which are as follows:

1. Observation
2. Survey
3. Case study
4. Questionnaire
5. Interview.

4.7 OBSERVATION

Observation is used as a tool of collecting information in situations where methods other than observation can not prove useful, e.g., voter's behaviour during election time. The purpose of observation is to explore important events and situations capturing human conduct as it actually happens. The observation is possible in two ways:

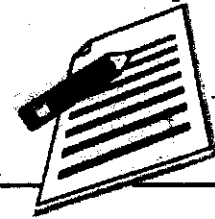
- i. Participant Observation
- ii. Non-Participant Observation.

Participant Observation:

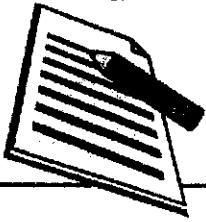
It is one of the techniques of data collection. In small and pre-literate society, this technique can be easily used. But its use becomes quite complicated, when society is complex. It is possible to administer this technique with good results when the identity of the observer can be clocked, that he or she mixes with the inmates of the situation and look at it from inside. At the same time, a successful employment of this method requires a high degree of maturity, because quite often the observer may get lost into the nuances of the situation, so much as to lose objectivity.

Non-Participant Observation:

In non-participant observation, the observer remains detached and does not participate or intervene in the activities of those who are being observed. He



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merely observes their behaviour. Sometimes this places the persons being observed in an awkward position and their conduct becomes unnatural.

Non-participant observation is not dependent on a systematic plan of observation. However, it facilitates the standardization of social situations to be observed and admits of a systematic plan of the whole observation process and the recording of results. This is because the observer is not required to participate actively in the social processes at work in the social field he is observing. Since he is not himself immediately affected by the demands of the situation, he can concentrate his whole attention more easily on systematic observation of the situation and what is happening in it.

Sarantakos (1998) has discussed six more types of observation. These are as under:

Structured and Unstructured observation:

Structured observation is characterized by a careful definition of the units to be observed, information to be recorded, the selection of pertinent data for observation and standardization of conditions of observation. The unstructured observation is diametrically opposed to the structured observation in its ideal-typical formulation. Structured observation, in so far as it is used mainly in studies starting with relatively specific formulations, normally allows for much less freedom of choice with respect to the content of observation than is allowed in unstructured observation.

Natural and laboratory observation:

Natural observation is one in which observation is made in natural settings while laboratory observation is one in which observation is made in a laboratory.

Open and Hidden Observation:

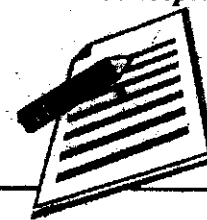
Open observation is one in which the identity of the researcher as well as the purpose of study are known to the participants. In hidden observation, both these remain hidden from the people under observation.

Direct and Indirect Observation:

In direct observation, the observer plays a passive role, i.e., there is no attempt to control or manipulate the situation. The observer merely records what occurs. Indirect observation is one in which direct observation of the object is not possible because either the subject is dead or refuses to take part in the study. In most of the cases, it is used by criminologists to observe the situation of murder etc.

Covert and Overt Observation:

In covert observation, subjects are unaware that they are being observed. Generally, the researcher in this type of observation is himself a participant in all the activities;

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otherwise it becomes difficult for him to explain his presence. These observations are mostly unstructured. Sometimes this causes them to act differently than they do normally. For example, if a policeman in a police station knows that his behaviour is being watched by a researcher, he will never think of using third-degree methods in dealing with the accused persons; rather he would show that he is polite and sympathetic.

Social Survey:

Social survey is a systematic and comprehensive study of a particular community with a view to analyze a social problem with a diagnostic purpose in mind, so that it is also accompanied by certain set of recommendations. The purpose of survey is to provide information. The more accurate and comprehensive the information the better can be the planning. The goals of the community can then be achieved more fully.

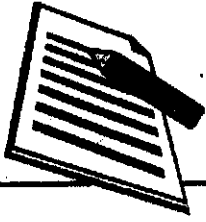
The techniques of survey are: mail questionnaire or interview to elicit information directly and interpreting the resulting data by means of statistical analysis. It provides an alternative to the experimental method or participant observation and is widely used in sociology. Surveys may use sampling in order that inferences may be made from the sample about a wider population with a known degree of accuracy, as in government surveys and investigation of public opinion. When the populations are small, sociological surveys may cover whole groups rather than samples. Even when taking a sample from a wider population, sociologists may treat the sample as a self-contained whole and may not attempt to generalize for the wider population from the sample. Surveys may be used in case study research. Sociologists use different types of survey in their research depending upon the nature of the study.

The classification of Surveys:

1. Descriptive: to describe what exists and to identify the need.
2. Explanatory: to identify changes and their causes.
3. Predictive: to predict future changes and possible effects of new policies.
4. Evaluative: to evaluate the results of the past policies.

Case Study:

Case study is a method of studying social phenomena through the analysis of an individual case. The case may be a person, a group, an institution, a classroom, an episode, a process, a society or any other unit of social life. All data relevant to the case are gathered, and all available data are organized in terms of the case. The case study method gives a unitary



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character to the data being studied by inter-relating a variety of facts to a single case. It also provides an opportunity for the intensive analysis of many specific details that are often overlooked with other methods. This approach rests on the assumption that the case being studied is typical of cases of a certain type, so that through intensive analysis generalizations may be made which will be applicable to other cases of the same type.

In brief, case study is a closely-focused analysis of a single unit in which all behaviour is examined using a range of methods. Some measurement is likely to be required (for example, frequency with which males wash up in a household). The techniques of case study are: observation; interviews; questionnaire; press reports; letters; diaries; participation.

The questionnaire:

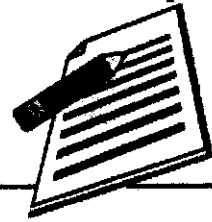
This must be carefully prepared and tested to check its value. Words and phrases must be familiar and simple; questions must not be ambiguous; it should demand short and easy-to-analyze answers; it should be value-free and it should provide the data from which the hypothesis can be tested. The researcher must decide whether to use it in a face-to-face interview or to send it through the post. Questionnaires are normally sent by post to the respondents

Interviews:

Interview is a conversation between an investigator and an informant for the purpose of gathering information. A number of the social sciences use the interview as one of their techniques of data collection. The interview-schedule is filled by the researcher himself while engaged in the face-to-face interview of the respondent. There are two types of interviews: (a) the structured, formal interview follows a set pattern. All the questions are decided beforehand and the exact wording remains the same in each one. It is standardized and controlled. (b) The informal, unstructured interview allows the respondents to expand and develop answers. A tape recorder may also prove very handy if allowed by the respondent. The interviewer must be skilled and able to direct the respondents in order to obtain information relevant to the study.

The choice of the interview method depends on the aim of the study, the time and funds available and the skill of the researcher. The more standardized answers may help to provide a more specific picture of attitudes and opinions since comparisons can be made between answers. The more open-ended answers help to provide a more detailed picture which is particularly useful in a case study.

These methods are not necessarily exclusive. There can be combination of them. The purpose of all these methods, in a way, is to try to answer the question: 'why do people behave the way they do?' The sociological theories and concepts have



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emerged as a result of these studies. These methods are not necessarily alternatives: they can be used in conjunction with each other. It depends on what you wish to discover. One method may be more appropriate than another for different aspects of the same study. A survey, for example, also requires observational detail to supplement it.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 4.2

1. What are the types of data collection?
2. Name five techniques of data collection.
3. What are two main types of observation?
4. Can survey be used in case study method?
5. What are the two types of interview?



TERMINAL EXERCISE

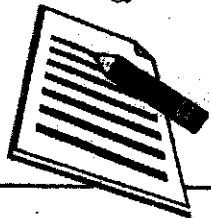
1. Explain the following methods: Historical, Comparative, Experimental, Functional methods.
2. What is an empirical method? Discuss its techniques of data collection.
3. Define observation and discuss its types.
4. What is a case study? Distinguish between survey and case study.
5. Define and distinguish between questionnaire and interview schedule.



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

4.1

- | | | | |
|------------|----------|------------|------------|
| 1. True | 2. False | 3. True | 4. True |
| 5. Ref 4.1 | 6. Five | 7. Ref 4.2 | 8. Ref 4.4 |

**Notes**

4.2

1. Refer 4.5
2. Refer 4.6
3. Refer 4.7
4. Refer 4.7
5. Refer 4.7

**SUGGESTED READINGS**

Bottomore, T.B. (1970). *Sociology: A guide to Problems and Literature*.

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